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HISTORY & GENEALOGY

A Brief Sketch of ^e
The Life of George Webb

A Cape Cod Captain in the Revolutionary War.

By Josiah Paine, Harwich, Mass.



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A Brief Sketch of
The Life of George Webb

A Cape Cod Captain in the Revolutionary War.

By Josiah Paine, Harwich, Mass.

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This brave officer who served throughout the Revolutionary war, who participated in seventeen engagements, and who was considered by his superior officers a trusty captain, was a Cape Cod man, and was born in that part of old Yarmouth, now Dennis, June 9, 1740. He was the eldest of the two sons of John and Betsey (Sears) Webb. His father was a mariner who had for some time been connected in some way with the British navy. Some few years after the birth of his youngest son, John, he went on a sea voyage and never returned. The sons, George and John, hardly remembered him; but their recollection of him was such as to establish in their minds an opinion of his regular nautical training and his ability as a disciplinarian that was never forgotten. The mother died at the age of 35, in September, 1755, and lies buried in old Winslow burying ground in East Dennis, a stone

with an inscription marking the place of burial. She was a daughter of John and Priscilla (Freeman) Sears, born about 1720,* and married John Webb, Aug. 23, 1739.

In 1760, it appears, Capt. Webb had his first experience as a soldier in active service. At that time he was not twenty years of age, yet he felt it his patriotic duty to heed the call of the Provincial government for volunteers to re-enforce Gen. Amherst's army now preparing for the final ending of the French control of Canada, and bringing to a close the long war for that end, for which, from its beginning, the Cape towns had furnished many soldiers; so he enlisted to serve in Capt. Thomas West's company, and was mustered in at the North parish, in Harwich, March 18, 1760. Capt. West was a young man then residing in Chatham, and his company was made up mostly by young men of about young Webb's age, recruited in the Cape towns.

Capt. West had seen much of martial life. He was at the taking of Cape Breton in 1745, and had served as a corporal nearly a year, in a company against the French and Indians, led by Capt. Peleg West of Tisbury, in 1757. He had also served as a first lieutenant in the company led by Capt. Samuel Knowles of Eastham, in 1758. This company was in Col. Doty's regiment under Gen. Abercrombie, and participated in the disastrous attempt to take Ticonderoga from the French.

*The old house occupied by her father was, a few years since, standing in East Dennis, just west of the Brewster line and southwesterly of the old Sears burying ground in West Brewster. It was built, it is supposed, about the year 1705.

Capt. Thomas West's company took up its line of march from the public house* of "Widow Howes" in Harwich, April 26, for the rendezvous in Worcester by the way of Boston. From Worcester, the company proceeded to the frontier, and joined the "Western Army." Its term of service expired the last of December following, and Capt. West returned to Chatham. But becoming interested in lands in Barrington, Nova Scotia, as a proprietor, he went to that place and settled upon his land, and there died about the year 1769. He was a fearless, self-reliant man and a good soldier.

Upon the disbandment of the company, young Webb returned to his home; but of his subsequent life to the beginning of the Revolutionary war, very little is known. It is thought he became engaged in seafaring business, as his brother, John, was a master mariner before his removing to western Massachusetts. The Harwich records show he intended marriage with Ann Sears, Aug. 22, 1761, and that his marriage to her, by Rev. Isaiah Dunster of Harwich, took place October 29 following. He undoubtedly was at this time a resident. In 1771, his name appears as a tax payer in Harwich. His place of residence was in that part of old Harwich, now Brewster.

When the Revolutionary war broke out it found him on the right side, against England, fired with ardent patriotism, ready to

*This "public house" was situated in North Harwich on the north side of the way from Chatham to Yarmouth, close to the west side of the Herring river, and had been known as "Downes' Tavern."

take the field and fight against England with the same zeal he had fought when a lad of twenty for England in the French and Indian war. By the record it appears his first service in the cause of liberty as an officer was as first lieutenant of the company of coast guards, commanded by Capt. Seth Clark of the North precinct of Harwich. The company numbered about fifty men, who were chiefly residents of the town. It was raised principally to observe the movements of the British war vessels upon the southern coast of the Cape, and in case of any attempt of landing men to oppose it. It was on duty from July 1, to December 31, 1775, when it was disbanded, having performed efficient duty. Some of these men afterwards served in the Continental army at various times.

Early in the year 1776, Lieut. Webb became the first lieutenant of Capt. Peter Harwood's company of light infantry in the Continental army under Washington. In this company he served more than a year, when he was promoted to the captaincy of a company in Col. William Sheperd's regiment of light infantry which was known as the Massachusetts Fourth, ranking from January 1, 1777. While lieutenant in Capt. Harwood's company he participated in several engagements among which were Trenton and Princeton.

Capt. Webb's company was composed of young men chiefly enlisted in Barnstable county. Twenty-two of them were enlisted in Harwich and were mustered by Gen. Joseph Otis of Barnstable, the muster master. Some of the company were enlisted for nine months, some for three years and a few for the war.

While in command of his company, Capt. Webb was in many

of the battles that gave our arms the victory. He was in Glover's brigade and Sheperd's regiment in the two engagements that preceded the surrender of the army of Burgoyne at Saratoga, Oct. 17, 1777, and was present at the capitulation. He was with Washington and his army in the winter quarters at Valley Forge during the intensely cold winter of 1777-78, which followed Burgoyne's surrender, where he and his men, and other soldiers in the snow covered encampment, spent indeed a trying period. It was surely his winter of discontent, as well as that of Washington and his army in the encampment. Well could these soldiers—hungry, ragged, shoeless and shivering in their poorly constructed log huts during that rigorous winter—have said with the foremost political writer in America in 1776 when our arms were suffering repeated defeats and gloom hung over the colonies—"These are the times that try men's souls."

The encampment at Valley Forge was on the west side of the Schuylkill river in Pennsylvania and about twenty miles northwest of Philadelphia. This position for an encampment was taken by Washington for the purpose, says Marshall, "of covering the country of Pennsylvania, protecting the magazines laid up in it and cutting off those supplies to the British in Philadelphia which many of the people were disposed to furnish them." It was "a very strong and commanding piece of ground for the purpose," but bleakly situated for winter headquarters. The army entered it from Whitmarsh, a place not far distant, December 14, and at once commenced building huts for occupancy during its stay. The snow

was upon the ground, and during the march many of the soldiers left bloody footprints in the snow, they being without shoes. Both Marshall and Thacher give a deplorable condition of the army in this place.

During the six months at Valley Forge Capt. Webb's company was not free from sickness and death, nor from diminution in number through expiration of enlistment. The terms of two of his men from Eastham, John Myrick and Amos Doane, who had enlisted for nine months, expired here in midwinter. The former rather than to suffer longer here, upon his discharge, returned to his home, while the latter chose to re-enlist for another nine months, probably on account of sickness, as he was sick in camp about three months "of a fever and the smallpox," all probably the result of inoculation. John Young and Crocker Young, both of old Harwich, in the company, doubtless found resting places here, as they were reported in March as being dead. Haskell Freeman, Watson Freeman and Edward Nickerson, with others, all young men from old Harwich, were in the company, and survived the terrible winter, and had the privilege to be at the battle of Monmouth and Rhode Island the same year and test their bravery.

Capt. Webb was with his company in Sheperd's regiment, and Glover's brigade at the battle of Monmouth, June 28, 1778, when Washington turned defeat into victory. The day was excessively warm, and his men suffered intensely from heat and thirst. The day was Sunday and the conflict continued from nine in the morning till darkness. At night the men lay upon their arms on the warm ground expecting a renewal of the fight in the morning, but

when it dawned there was no British army in sight, and Washington with his army proceeded on to White Plain on the Hudson for headquarters. The day at Monmouth was never forgotten by the old soldiers when telling stories by the fireside of the capture of Burgoyne, and of their stay at Valley Forge.

Soon after returning to the Hudson, Capt. Webb's company was sent to Rhode Island, and there under Gen. Sullivan, took part in the battle fought at Quaker Hill, August 29, 1778. In this battle Capt. Webb had two of his men, belonging to old Harwich, severely wounded. They were Haskell Freeman and Watson Freeman. The former was unfit for duty for sometime on the account of his wound, and was given a furlough for recuperation. He was promoted to the lieutenancy, Nov. 26, 1779, but resigned Aug. 24, 1780, on the account of ill health, due to the wounds he had received at Rhode Island.

Capt. Webb was on duty in Col. Sheperd's regiment at the hanging of Maj. John Andre, the spy, Oct. 2, 1780, at Tappan, N. Y.

With his command, he was in the detachment under Lafayette, sent by General Washington from the main army to strengthen the continental force in Virginia early in the spring of 1781, in protecting that colony from the depredations of Cornwallis's army then centering there. It was in May, following the arrival of the detachment, that he had a brisk and successful skirmish with the enemy while out on an important excursion with his command. The defeat of the enemy by the bravery of Capt. Webb greatly

pleased Gen. Lafayette, and he sent to his trusty captain a letter,* assuring him that the "successful skirmish" had "afforded" him "the greatest pleasure," and desired him to accept his "best thanks" and convey the same to his company "on this occasion."

At other times afterwards, while Lafayette's division was watching the movements of Cornwallis's detachments, and badgering them at every point about Richmond, Petersburg and places north and south of James river and other points in that part of Virginia, he was sent out on secret service and was equally as successful in good results.

When the seige of Yorktown commenced, he held his command in Gen. Lafayette's division, and was given an active part in the intrenchments before that doomed place with his brave men, and was present when it fell and the British army under Cornwallis surrendered. In his company in the trenches before the illfated place, in uniform, with blistered hands, displaying great gallantry, enduring hardship, and daring to follow where her brave captain dared to lead, was the noted heroine, Deborah Sampson of Massachusetts, a new recruit, bearing the name of Robert Shurtliffe, the story of whose life in the sacred cause of liberty has so often been read.

Capt. Webb after the surrender of Cornwallis remained in Yorktown until the middle of November following, when, with his company in the detachment in which he had rendered such important service, returned to the headquarters of Washington's army

*History of Holden, Mass.

on the Hudson, where he was on duty until the middle of January, 1782, when Gen. McDougal gave him a furlough to visit Massachusetts. After an absence of seven months he reported for duty at Westpoint and again entered service, August 15. In January, 1783, independence of the United States being well assured, no active duty seemed to be in sight; the routine of camp life having lost some of its charms, and longing to be again with his family in a new home, he resigned his commission, returned his sword to the scabbard, bade adieu to his old comrades in arms, and returned to his family at the new home he had provided in Holden, Worcester county,—Harwich being no longer his place of abode,—where he continued to reside the closing years of his eventful life, commanding the respect of the people of the place.

There were many interesting incidents in the life of Capt. Webb while in his long and continuous service of seven and one-half years in the cause of liberty that were known to his family, to the children of his brother, John, and to those who served under him that period of time, showing his adroitness and intrepidity in charge of hazardous enterprises; his dexterity as a submarine leader; summary dealings with pugilists and political carpers of tory proclivities. But it is a matter of regret that these incidental relations have not all reached our time.

An incident related by one of his kinsmen serves to show the valor and firmness of Capt. Webb in an emergency, and how he, by proper maneuvering of his men, escaped capture when unexpectedly met by the enemy. He was out on a foraging expedition which had required the greatest precaution to insure success, but

which on this occasion was without avail. While on his march he was intercepted by a large party of English, and shortly was ordered to surrender. Although greatly outnumbered and hard pushed, he scornfully resented the command and laconically replied, "Come and take me if you can!" So fighting and retreating, each man doing his very best for some hours, at last a relief party from the main army met him, and his command was saved from capture though hotly pressed.

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The year in which Capt. Webb had his family removed from the old home in Harwich to Worcester County is not yet precisely known. It is a matter of record, however, that he began to purchase land in Holden in 1780 while yet in the army. His first purchase there was made of Simeon Lyons of that town of a very large tract of land, June 12, that year. At this time he claimed Harwich as his place of residence. His next purchase there was December 25, 1782, of John Jolls of several large parcels, amounting to many acres. At this date he is mentioned as of Holden. Subsequently he made more purchases of land in that town; and upon his leaving the army, as already stated in January, 1783, he went to Holden* and became a citizen. His removal from Harwich to that town was probably encouraged by his only brother, John Webb, who had left the seafaring business and made Hardwick, a town near by, his home. The house occupied by Capt. George Webb is yet standing in Holden and known as the "Webb house."

*In 1913, a Chapter of the D. A. R. was instituted in Holden which bears his name.

The death of Capt. Webb occurred August 25, 1825, at the age of 85. He lies buried in Holden and the grave is marked by a stone with inscription. His widow, Ann, died August 2, 1827, at the age of 85 years. Under the pension act of 1818, he applied for and received a pension, which he continued to receive as long as he lived.

Capt. Webb was held in high esteem by his townsmen and at times selected for official positions. He was early a member of the "Society of the Cincinnati" of Massachusetts, which was formed in 1783, and was such at the time of his death.

Capt. Webb was a man of great valor and resolution, which were tempered by good judgment. He was cautious when it was necessary and resolute when resolution was needed. No duty assigned him was neglected. By nature he was fitted for a higher position in the army of patriots than a captain, but he would not allow promotion. He was contented with his captain's commission. When once asked if he would accept a colonel's commission, his answer was, "It's a pity to spoil a good captain to make a poor colonel."

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